

**Dilemmas in re-branding a university—“Maybe people just don’t like change”: Linking meaningfulness and mutuality into the reconciliation**

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## **Dilemmas in re-branding a university—“Maybe people just don’t like change”: Linking meaningfulness and mutuality into the reconciliation**

**Abstract** This study examines the implementation of a re-branding campaign in a public Canadian university. Data collection comprised 19 qualitative semi-structured interviews with key internal university stakeholders (Dean & Mid-level Administrators). The data revealed three core dilemma pairs: 1) new brand vs. previous brand; 2) voice at the organisational level vs. voice at the departmental level; and 3) voluntary down-up voicing vs. up-down voicing. Results suggest that successfully implementing the new brand should not exclusively rely upon internal marketing communication; instead, internal branding through handling ambiguities and addressing emerging dilemmas by enhancing engagement, building mutuality and unlocking the meaning in the re-branding can prove improve success.

This study reveals that implementing a re-branding campaign in higher education involves embracing the world of dilemmas by involving and empowering employees in dilemma reconciliation. The reconciliation of detected brand-related dilemmas with and by employees can be achieved by involving employees in the process of re-branding from the beginning. Indeed, this paper suggests the preparedness to detect and address dilemmas is central to successful re-branding. Our results indicate that traditional change management approaches produce unreconciled dilemmas that hinder the implementation of the new brand. We conclude that efforts to build employee engagement in re-branding do not build employee supportiveness towards the new brand unless core dilemmas are reconciled.

**Keywords:** Re-branding, internal branding, dilemma theory, higher education, public sector

## **Introduction**

Brands have traditionally been considered “identifiers” that differentiate goods or services from those of competitors (American Marketing Association, 2018). However, the recent literature on branding has increasingly regarded brands as dynamic and co-created through a social process with internal and external stakeholders (e.g. Merz *et al* 2009; Iglesias *et al* 2013). Accordingly, branding is a much deeper process than simply naming a product or designing the visible brand components, such as logos and colours (e.g. de Chernatony and Dall’Olmo 1997). The current study was conducted in the context of public higher education, where universities compete for scarce resources (Suomi, 2014). Thus, the importance of branding has also increased in marketised academia (Hemsley-Brown, 2011). In competitive environments, universities engage in re-branding endeavours with aim of “*enhancing, regaining, transferring and/or recreating the corporate brand equity*” (Muzellec and Lambkin 2006, 820). Like any branding effort, re-branding efforts should begin with internal stakeholders: in other words, with internal branding (e.g. Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). With regard to internal branding, we follow Punjaisri and Wilson (2011, 1523), who maintain that “*internal branding describes the activities undertaken by an organisation to ensure that the brand promise reflecting the espoused brand values that set customers’ expectations is enacted and delivered by employees*”.

For the last decade, studies have been conducted on university branding (e.g. Chapleo, 2007; Sataøen, 2015; Wilkins *et al* 2017) and internal branding in the university context (Judson *et al* 2006; Judson *et al* 2009; Sujchaphong *et al* 2014; Chapleo and Clark, 2016; Dean *et al* 2016). Indeed, in their recent study, Dean *et al* (2016) maintain that the complex nature of the university context emphasises the role of marketing and internal branding in comprehending a university organisation’s brand identity. This is important because, without an internal understanding of the brand identity, it is challenging for an organization to develop a shared brand meaning and communicate it to external stakeholders. Therefore, it is important that

university management carefully deliberate the alignment of external and internal brand communication (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Earlier studies have described the benefits of (effective) internal branding in the university context (e.g. Whisman, 2009; Sujchaphong *et al* 2014; Dean *et al* 2016), but our literature review reveals that knowledge of possible drawbacks and pitfalls in internal branding is still limited (Chapleo and Clark, 2016), particularly within the re-branding process. Thus, studying this topic is of benefit to both academics and practitioners. In the current study, we apply a dilemma approach to detect potential dilemmas that might hinder an effective re-branding process. In line with Hampden-Turner (1990, 29), Kangaslahti (2007) and Kuoppakangas (2015, 82) we consider dilemmas to be practical organisational challenges that require reconciliations.

The dilemma approach has been used to resolve management dilemmas in the contexts of healthcare (e.g. Hytti *et al* 2015), comprehensive education (Kangaslahti, 2007) and higher education in Singapore and Finland (Hampden-Turner, 2009; Suomi *et al* 2014). Suomi *et al.* (2014) argue that the dilemma approach is applicable for resolving dilemmas related to reputation and brand management in the university context, and recommend that more research be conducted in other countries and cultures on this topic. Existing research on re-branding discusses the challenges, conflicting goals and hindrances of implementing a new brand (e.g. Merrilees and Miller, 2008; Miller *et al* 2014). However, explicit research detecting, naming and defining these challenges as dilemmas and searching for dilemma reconciliations by building meaningfulness and mutuality in connection to the re-branding endeavour within the university context is still scarce (Suomi *et al* 2014). Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore core dilemmas related to internal branding in the context of university re-branding.

The next section provides the theoretical background for the study. The case university is then briefly introduced, and the data collection and analysis are described. Thereafter,

empirical results are reported. Finally, the discussion and conclusions are presented together with limitations and suggestions for future studies.

## **Literature review**

### *University branding*

A clear and consistent brand can be considered necessary for contemporary universities in their competitive environment. Universities wish to attract both on-campus and online/open learning students (e.g. Naudé and Ivy, 1999; Chapleo, 2005; Robinson, 2017), as well as international students in the global higher education market (Basha *et al* 2015). Universities must also attract and retain competent and efficient faculty members (Whisman, 2009; see also Kallio and Kallio, 2014). Generating positive word-of mouth from students and other stakeholders is increasingly important, particularly in the current digital era (e.g. Herold *et al* 2016). Further, support from alumni, businesses, local community and media is crucial (e.g. Baker *et al* 2005; Ressler and Abratt, 2009; Pedro *et al* 2018), as is obtaining funding (e.g. Ressler and Abratt, 2009). Moreover, building a unique brand identity that differentiates a university from other providers of higher education is of utmost importance (Bennett and Ali-Choudhury, 2009; Suomi *et al* 2013; Dennis *et al* 2016).

However, scholars have described branding in the university context as challenging due to a number of reasons. For example, the context is characterized by both a complicated stakeholder environment and the question of who the university's customers actually are. In particular, in such a complex stakeholder environment, views differ on prioritisation and the best approaches to communicate one cohesive brand that resonates with all groups (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Chapleo and Simms, 2010; see also Nicholls *et al* 1995). University branding challenges also stem from interpersonal and interdepartmental conflicts rooted in, for example, conflicting working methods and cultures within different disciplines (Suomi *et al*

2013; Suomi and Järvinen, 2013), as well as internal opposition to branding campaigns and overall marketing orientation (Nicholls *et al* 1995; Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009; Aspara *et al* 2014). Furthermore, universities are also characterized by a complex brand hierarchy as these institutions have multiple sub-brands in the form of distinct faculties, schools and regional campuses (Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Chapleo, 2009; Suomi, 2014; Suomi *et al* 2014). In the university context, there is often internal resistance towards being under a single unified umbrella brand (e.g. Aspara *et al* 2014). Research also suggests inefficient and non-existent internal branding approaches can both cause problems (e.g. Whisman, 2009) and hinder the search for relevant ways for university to build a distinct brand identity/personality (Chapleo, 2005; Rutter *et al* 2017). Finally, reputation management and the building of coherent brands in the public sector context using public money have been described as problematic in general due to factors that include a complex stakeholder environment, government intervention and the debate on the acceptance of market principles among many academics (e.g. Wæraas, 2008; Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012; Leijerholt *et al* 2018).

### *Internal branding*

Scholars have highlighted the importance of employees in building strong service brands (e.g. Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos, 2014). Thus, not only should internal branding activities be considered just as important as external ones, but internal branding efforts should also precede external ones (e.g. Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Internal branding may be seen as “*a doctrine to ensure employees’ delivery of the brand promise by shaping employees’ brand attitudes and behaviours*” (Punjaisri *et al* 2008, 407). Indeed, it is suggested when employees adopt the organization’s brand values, they will deliver on the brand promise to external stakeholders (e.g. Punjaisri and Wilson, 2011). Accordingly, Dechawatanapaisal (2018, 677) highlights that, through internal branding, it is possible for organisations to engender employees’ attitudes towards the brand and ensure that employees deliver on the brand promise to external

stakeholders (see also Sujchaphong *et al* 2014; Liu *et al* 2015). Employees might be recognised as a key target group of branding and considered the organisation's internal customers (e.g. Dechawatanapaisal, 2018). Indeed, additional research suggests internal branding refers to the internal management processes aimed at helping employees comprehend, commit to and “live” the brand concept (Merrilees and Frazer, 2013).

Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) note that the two main mechanisms of internal branding are internal communication and training. Lee *et al* (2014) highlight a third mechanism: reward. Further, empirical evidence has shown that internal branding efforts that incorporate training, communication and reward have a positive effect on employee engagement (Lee *et al* 2014).

In relation to employees' engagement efforts, studies have inspected and measured the meaningfulness of work and organisational changes and their effects on employee work satisfaction and well-being (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; George and Park, 2017). According to Yeoman and O'Hara (2017), meaningfulness may enhance stakeholders' willingness to engage in organisational changes. They argue that meaningfulness is generated by mutuality in organisations and is closely linked to values and moral issues. Wolf (1997, 305) defines meaningfulness as emerging when “*subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness*”. Experiencing meaningfulness requires a person to become proactively connected to and emotionally involved in someone or something of value: in other words, to be engaged in a particular endeavour and building of mutuality.

Löhndorf and Diamantopoulos (2014) note that internal branding should be closely linked to human resource management. Also concerning the outcomes of internal branding, Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) highlight brand identification, brand commitment and brand loyalty (see also Sharma and Kamalanabhan, (2012) as being the most significant. Further, Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) maintain that internal branding enhances an employee's sense of belonging or “oneness” (see also Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007). In their recent study, Iyer *et al* (2018)

emphasise the role of internal branding in enhancing an organisation's performance by improving brand performance.

Aspara *et al*'s (2014) study found that strong cynicism occurred among students and faculty when a merged university started to heavily rebrand itself in Finland without successful internal branding. The internal stakeholders felt that an "American-style" and "pro-business university" was too far from values of a Nordic welfare society, and their disapproval was reflected in measures as dramatic as the circulation of satirical versions of the new visual imagery on the internet (Aspara *et al* 2014). Further, Sujchaphong *et al* (2014) argue that internal branding appears to actually decrease the gap between the desired brand and that perceived by the organisation's stakeholders. Similarly, Miles and Mangold (2005) maintain that internal branding creates a psychological contract between an organisation and an employee that goes beyond the actual employment contract. In short, effective and well-planned internal branding should be considered a precondition for successful external branding.

### *Re-branding*

According to Muzellec and Lambkin (2006, 805), re-branding can be described as: "*the creation of a new name, term, symbol, design or a combination of them for an established brand with the intention of developing a differentiated (new) position in the mind of stakeholders and competitors*". As such, it is necessary to get stakeholders' "buy-in" in re-branding (Merrilees and Miller, 2008). Muzellec and Lambkin (2006, 810) argue that drivers of re-branding can be classified into four main categories: changes in ownership (e.g. mergers and acquisitions), changes in corporate strategy (e.g. internationalisation and localisation), changes in external environment (e.g. outdated image and reputation problems) and changes in competitive position (e.g. crises and catastrophes).



Merrilees and Miller (2008, 546) note that designing a suitable brand vision for the corporate rebrand—in other words, the brand revision—is highly important for balancing between the core ideology of the corporate brand and developing the brand to keep it relevant for contemporary conditions. The process of implementing brand revision throughout an organisation requires a high level of communication, training and internal marketing. Further, effective re-branding requires the integration and coordination of each brand element into the implementation of the corporate re-branding strategy. In addition, promotion is needed to inform relevant stakeholders of the revised brand (Merrilees and Miller, 2008). Accordingly, Muzellec and Lambkin (2006) argue that re-branding should be managed in a holistic manner and supported by all relevant stakeholders, paying particular attention to employees' perceptions.

To conclude the above discussion, re-branding and internal branding are closely related concepts because internal branding should be inherent in any re-branding endeavour. This is especially true in the university context due to this context's special characteristics and assumed internal resistance. Further, both internal branding and re-branding endeavours not only emphasise the role of employee and stakeholder “buy-in” but also appear to benefit from well-planned human resource and change management (see also Merrilees and Miller, 2008).

#### *Dilemma approach*

The current study discerns core dilemmas that hinder the re-branding of the case organisation. Dilemmas are closely connected to extreme organisational values, and reconciliations are more likely when there is organisational engagement and mutuality. Thus, according to Yeoman and O'Hara (2017), seeking engagement and mutualisation among employees can unlock meaningfulness. Furthermore, organisations should define mutual values and when necessary find new ones. Organisations can provide platforms for mutuality by encouraging employees

to voice their different opinions and interpretations of meanings. Shared experiences and joint reconciliations of dilemmas may enhance mutuality and, in turn, meaningfulness.

Thus, institutional re-branding may involve dilemmas that hinder the implementation of the new brand. In theory, the approaches and definitions of dilemmas occasionally overlap or contradict the concept of paradox (Hampden-Turner, 1981, 1990, 2009; Smith and Lewis, 2011; Kuoppakangas 2014, 2015). We consider paradox to be a philosophical concept representing what Smith and Lewis (2011, 386) and Kuoppakangas (2015, 82) describe as “*contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time*”. When these elements are combined, they can appear both illogical and logical (Lewis and Dehler, 2000, 708; see also Kuoppakangas, 2015, 82).

Furthermore, we consider dilemmas to be practical organisational challenges that require reconciliations (Hampden-Turner 1990, 29; Kangaslahti, 2007; Kuoppakangas, 2015, 82). According to Hampden-Turner (1981, 1990, 2009), dilemmas can be illustrated as two extremes, X and Y, which are both logical and desirable. Both X and Y have benefits and shortcomings. The two extremes derive from organisational values or goals (i.e. interorganisational collaboration versus interorganisational competition). Consequently, tensions appear when decisions between the two extremes are considered either/or situations. These tensions can be reduced through dilemma reconciliation, which addresses the problematic decision-making in both/and situations exploiting the two extremes. This does not necessarily mean a compromise between X and Y. Furthermore, different dilemma pairs are not always separate from one another; instead, they are often interconnected. Reconciling one dilemma pair might produce a reciprocal effect and aid in reconciling other dilemmas. In addition, dilemmas yield continuous reconciliation. According to existing research, such dilemma reconciliations may facilitate continuous organisational development and successful

change implementation (Hampden-Turner, 1981, 1990, 2009; Suomi *et al* 2014; Hytti *et al* 2015; Kuoppakangas, 2015).

## **Methodology**

In the current study, we apply a qualitative and case design and a holistic approach (Ghauri, 2004). A single-case design was chosen because it has been suggested that broad, complex and context-specific topics benefit from such a research design (e.g. Iacano *et al* 2009). The case study was conducted at a public Canadian university comprising nearly 26,000 enrolled students, of whom approximately 2,800 are international students and 13,500 are online students. The institution was founded in 1970 and provides a comprehensive range of different faculties and schools. The case study was conducted during the autumn of 2016, approximately six months after the university brand relaunch.

The data was gathered through semi-structured phone interviews. Informants were asked to describe their experiences and views concerning the university's re-branding endeavour. The sample comprised 19 informants, including a comprehensive range of mid-level administrators and deans at the student union, regional campuses, different departments and specific faculties and schools. The chosen informants were regarded information-rich key persons who have a key responsibility for understanding, embracing and implementing the brand to employees that they manage, and as such are a core initial group for understating the success of a programme of internal branding. The interviews were audio recorded and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes each, yielding close to 400 pages of transcribed text.

The informants were not explicitly asked about possible dilemmas inherent in the re-branding of the case university. Instead, they were asked about, for example, the re-branding process, the pros and cons of the rebranding process, their levels of involvement with the re-branding

process/implementation and any memorable events or incidents connected to the re-branding endeavour that affected their support for the new brand.

The empirical data were analysed using researcher triangulation and conducted in four phases. First, the recorded interviews were transcribed. Then, the transcribed materials were read and reread multiple times by the researchers. Next, the data were coded separately and together, and the coded materials were grouped into different emergent themes (Aberbach and Rockman, 2002; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008; Silverman, 2011) and narrative constructions (Barone, 2007, 456; James, 2017, 3105). Finally, through the grouping of the emergent themes via an iterative analysis, core dilemma pairs were detected and formed.

While analysing the empirical data, it became obvious that the informants experienced tensions that manifested in the implementation of the new brand in light of the organisational values. In analysing the data from an abductive perspective, as presented in the data analysis and discussion sections (Yin, 2003; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2008), we realised that the informants were trying to make sense of the re-branding endeavour by describing and balancing value extremes, which created tensions, hindered the implementation of the new brand and, thus, decreased the meaningfulness of the re-branding process. The iteration of the empirical data and the existing literature can be seen in the dilemma reconciliations in the discussion section of this study.

## **Results**

The following presents the findings, structured into the following three core dilemma pairs that emerged from the empirical data under the umbrella of challenges in building mutuality: 1) new brand vs. old brand; 2) voice at the organisational level vs. voice at the departmental level; and 3) voluntary down-up voicing vs. up-down voicing.

Most of the 19 informants had positive attitudes (supportiveness) towards higher education branding in general. Only four informants expressed negative attitudes towards the re-branding endeavour and did not find it as valuable as the rest of the informants. However, all 19 informants reflected on the three dilemma pairs, including informants with positive and negative attitudes towards the re-branding endeavour.

Next, we present both the narratives of the meaningful and meaningless re-branding experiences constructed from the 19 interviews. Further, we explicitly scrutinise the three core dilemma pairs (I through III) challenging the building of mutuality and construct them under the typology of values and voice, which are the key elements of building meaningfulness and mutuality in organisations (Lips-Wiersma, and Wright, 2012; George and Park, 2017; Yeoman and O'Hara, 2017). To secure the participants' anonymity, the citations of the empirical data are labelled as follows: informant (I) and the code number (e.g. informant number 10 = I-10). In addition, the extracts from the empirical data are illustrated in tables numbered from one through three, in line with the three core dilemma pairs presented in the following results section.

### **Challenges in Building Mutuality I**

#### *Dilemma 1: New brand vs. Previous brand*

##### *Organisational and professional values*

Even though most of the informants were positive about the potential valuable impact of higher education organisation branding, the re-branding endeavour suffered dilemmas, which hindered the re-branding process. For example, there were questions about the meaning of branding at higher education organisations overall and concerns about branding negatively impacting the organisations values. All the informants discussed the dilemma of the “new brand vs. previous brand” in terms of whether to invest in incremental changes to the previous

brand and the rationale of a costly full-fledged institutional re-branding. Of note, the organisation's senior leadership had made an earlier decision to invest in re-branding endeavours rather than campus-oriented activities, which seemed to contradict many of the organisation's informants' values. (Table 1)

#### *Lack of brand strategy*

Some of this criticism targeted, for example, the brand strategy or the lack thereof. Many of the informants discussed the issue of not having a branding strategy, which it was often connected to the reasoning behind either a complete re-branding or keeping the institutions previous brand and only incrementally renewing it. Furthermore, many informants perceived the new brand as only a mask on top of the previous brand, which sparked criticism about the meaningfulness of the re-branding activity. According to the empirical data, many of the informants would have appreciated more information about the re-branding planning: including, for example, an analysis of where the organisation was with the previous brand and where the organisation was going, the goals of the re-branding endeavour and what might be lost if the organisation kept the previous brand. (Table 1)

(Insert Table 1 about here)

#### *Frequent re-branding and ineffective use of financial and human sources*

The empirical data revealed additional cynicism in connection with the institution's re-branding activity. For example, some informants reported hardly remembering the previous brand, while others reported not knowing the meaning of the organisation's earlier brand. Furthermore, some informants felt that a higher education organisation engaging in frequent re-branding caused problems in terms of its organisational reputation and credibility. In support of this view, one informant referred to well-known brands like Nike and IBM staying

committed to keeping the same visual signs and colours, in line with classic branding guidelines (Aaker, 1996).

Additionally, all of the informants discussed the challenges and benefits of choosing between using the organisation's human and financial resources for university branding activities as opposed to using the institutions limited financial resources for more traditional learning-oriented purposes. In particular, balancing the pros and cons of maintaining the university's previous brand versus introducing a totally new brand drew attention to both the financial investment of branding. Informants specifically voiced that any kind of cost-benefit analysis about potential gains from investing in a new brand versus investing in incremental changes to the previous brand was not communicated to stakeholders. As such, the investment of financial and human resources in the re-branding endeavour was strongly criticised. According to most of the informants, in-depth information and education for the faculty on the valuable outcomes and meanings of the re-branding were missing. (Table 1)

#### *Independent school/faculty brand vs. one unifying brand*

In addition, while balancing the idea of the new brand vs. the previous brand, the informants actively dwelled on the challenges and benefits of choosing between maintaining independent faculty/school brands versus these brands being enveloped by an overarching university brand. Indeed, balancing many institutional brands or having one unifying brand for the organisation was one of the informants main points of concern. The decision to develop one overarching institutional brand unifying different faculties/schools within it through the re-branding created confusion and frustration among the informants (see also Wæraas and Solbakk, 2009) thus, according to the empirical data creating perception of a meaningless change and loss of individual faculty's/school's voices. (Table 1)

### **Challenges in Building Mutuality II**

## *Dilemma 2: Voice at the Organisational Level vs. Voice at the Departmental Level*

### *Unified new brand enhances consistency*

The data also revealed challenges and opportunities related to the extent different departments' operations were to remain independent versus becoming centralised within a larger university marketing and communications (MarCom) unit.

As the new brand sought to unify the former small brands into a single brand, to achieve these desired unifying effects, the earlier more independent departmental and unit marketing operations, were incorporated into the larger new centralised MarCom unit.

### *Loss of autonomy*

Many of the informants expressed concerns about balancing departmental and central MarCom, particularly with respect to being heard. Few informants felt that they still kept a degree of autonomy, but most of the informants explained how they had lost the autonomy to market their own departments. These informants voiced concern that their departments (or in some cases satellite campuses) had lost their unique identities, which were sometimes essential for student and employee recruitment. In other words, informants were concerned about how their different and distinctive departmental messages (voices) be heard when the brand messages were delivered at an organisational level with one voice: the unifying brand message? (Table 2)

(Insert Table 2 about here)

### *'One size does not fit all'*

Furthermore, with respect to balancing the dilemma pair of "voice at the organisational level vs. voice at departmental level", the matter of attracting students to on-campus education vs. attracting students to virtual on-line education raised critical discussion. After the marketing



communication was centralised, it appears early numbers showed student enrolment declining, especially in the Open-Learning department and online programmes. This early information was eye-opening for the informants because both the Open-Learning and the online programmes had historically recruited high numbers of students. Many of the informants dwelled on this matter and explained, for example, how the new unifying webpages for the new brand X [case university] were either excellent or confusing, noting, for example, that Open-Learning got lost in “the jungle” of information. However, some informants found the new unifying webpages helpful. (Table 2)

### *Mutual voice*

The empirical data also revealed, to achieve successful re-branding, it was crucial for the centralised MarCom unit to collaborate and communicate with these different departments, units and programmes. Most of the informants voiced a desire for the centralized MarCom unit to contact them and learn the unique differences and core identities of the different departments, units and programmes. In addition, some of the informants were disappointed that they had not received sufficient customer service from the new central MarCom unit and, after waiting to be contacted, decided to approach the MarCom unit themselves.

Also, many of the informants were unsatisfied with the loss of autonomy in terms of agility, creativity and speed related to the centralised MarCom unit meeting their departmental marketing needs. Additionally, few informants found contacting the new MarCom unit themselves fruitful or effective. Some informants also sought to educate the new expanded MarCom unit with what they stood for and their unique identities and values within the new unifying brand. Of note, those departments whose own marketing faculty members were subsumed into the new MarCom unit had more satisfying experiences than departments that did not have such an advantage. (Table 2)

Of note, however, many of the informants found the unifying new brand valuable and felt that it provided consistency for the university's brand in general. Though the new brand and marketing sought to unify the university in terms of the external stakeholders, there was a need to modify the marketing communication for the different departments, units, and programmes. (Table 2)

### **Challenges in Building Mutuality III**

#### *Dilemma 3: Voluntary Down-Up Voicing vs. Up-Down Voicing*

##### *Importance of internal communication*

Employee engagement in re-branding events can be valuable and fruitful when the results of the engagement are found meaningful: in other words, when the participants' voices are genuinely heard. On the other hand, when the 'voicing' is not genuinely taken into account in the re-branding processes, the engagement might be harmful and even meaningless. The challenges emerging in relation to Dilemma 3 concerned internal communication and employee engagement in the re-branding endeavour: specifically, how the employees were informed of the organisational changes and whether their voices were "heard" in connection to the re-branding processes. Though the informants were aware of and encouraged to engage in the multiple formal events, workshops, town-hall meetings, and informative emails connected to the re-branding processes, some found the communication insufficient. (Table 3)

##### *Voices heard*

Those who had engaged in the re-branding events and workshops found it easier to adapt to the re-branding implementation and found the new brand valuable and meaningful. In particular, those whose ideas had been genuinely heard and integrated into the re-branding were positive about the process. In contrast, some informants who had not been involved saw the re-branding waste of the institutions resources, though they also acknowledged that because they had not

participated it was challenging to support the process. Furthermore, some informants saw the situation as an opportunity for staff and students to participate in the process together and implying that there is a need to build mutuality and meaningfulness. (Table 3)

(Insert Table 3 about here)

#### *Voices not heard*

Some of the satellite campuses' informants felt that they had been left out and that their voices were not heard in the re-branding processes. They expressed concerns of not being able to build a sense of mutuality equal to that experienced by their peers on the main campus. Overall, it is apparent, the shared values of mutuality were questioned. Furthermore, those informants whom had participated in the re-branding process, but felt their input was not considered felt disappointed. In addition, some informants felt that they had not been initially consulted as to whether the institution should embark on a re-branding process in the first place. (Table 3)

#### *Voices lost*

Interestingly, some informants who had engaged in the re-branding workshops ultimately had more negative than positive attitudes towards the re-branding endeavour. For example, these informants found the re-branding somewhat meaningless and a waste of financial and human resources, seeing their engagement as a waste of time. Furthermore, some felt that the research methods used at the re-branding events and workshops to gather information on faculty opinions concerning the re-branding were insufficient and not rigorous enough to provide meaningful information for building the new brand based on the faculty's ideas. (Table 3)

#### *Voluntary vs involuntary engagement*

Lastly, some informants also felt that staff engagement in re-branding was imposed and not genuinely voluntary. This reaction was largely due to perceptions that the whole re-branding

process was already set and given ‘as-is’ from the top of the organisation and that the re-branding workshops were meaningless and would not affect the outcome of the new brand. (Table 3)

## **Discussion**

While analysing the empirical data, it became clear that the informants experienced three core dilemma pairs: 1) new brand vs. previous brand; 2) voice at the organisational level vs. voice at the departmental level; 3) voluntary down-up voicing vs. up-down voicing. All these dilemma pairs are linked to the values of the case organisation and the re-branding endeavour. Reconciling dilemma pairs begins with cherishing a mutual understanding of organisational values and how the new changes might fit existing values and finding mutuality through the creation of new values, which are often needed when organisations undergo changes. According to dilemma approach, dilemmas emerge when, for example, the organisational and/or professional values are contradictory. Contradictory values often affect the meaningfulness of organisational changes, and, in this study, particularly the re-branding endeavour.

Arising dilemmas will throw an internal shadow of criticism and feelings of meaninglessness on organisational changes. In addition, meaningfulness requires mutuality for not only shared existing values, but also shared new values. Creating new values that are also meaningful is nearly impossible unless the new values are mutually created and accepted by the employees and all “voices” are heard (see also Yeoman and O’Hara, 2017).

### **Reconciliations in Building Mutuality I**

#### *Dilemma 1: New Brand vs. Previous Brand*

Building meaningfulness around the institutions re-branding endeavour to reconcile Dilemma 1 requires including organisational and professional values in the branding strategy. Existing

research shows that internal branding helps employees construct subjective realities of the branding strategy and the organisational values and develop their own understanding to support reasoning and rationales for the value of branding (e.g. Punjaisri *et al* 2009), especially in the context of higher education (Sujchaphong *et al* 2014). In addition, internal branding has the potential to build an understanding of the added value of the re-branding, the changes it brings and how they will affect individual employees' work, mutuality and meaningfulness.

Brand strategies including an analysis of the organisation past with the previous brand and where the organisation is going, including the goals of the re-branding endeavour, are essential for successful re-branding. However, the case organisation's lack of a strategic branding plan created confusion among the employees and made the re-branding appear to be a fake 'mask' of organisational change (see also Kuoppakangas, 2014). The observed cynicism (see also Aspara *et al* 2014) and doubt concerning the meaningfulness of the re-branding could be overcome through a well-communicated brand strategy. Internal branding plays a critical role in communicating the brand strategy in a reciprocal manner, including the employees in the whole process and incorporating discussions of mutual value (Punjaisri and Wilson, 2007).

Many prominent brands sustain their original external brand signs over the decades (e.g. Aaker, 1996). However, re-branding is context-dependent and is not governed by any one unchangeable rule. Brand strategy and internal branding approaches have achieved success using both frequent and longer timelines. Overall, however, the empirical data suggest that internal branding plays a role in enhancing the meaningfulness of re-branding endeavours.

An institutions decision to either maintain an existing brand, or introduce a new brand, requires a financial analysis of both alternatives. Interestingly, in this case study, the idea of incremental re-branding also received opposing views. Some informants in this study urged for a totally new brand in a "big-bang" style change, arguing that incremental re-branding was an

ineffective use of financial resources. In such situations, analyses may not be conducted or may be ignored, especially when an organisation faces a tight financial situation. In the case organisation, the question arose as to whether to invest funds in higher education activities or in the institutions re-branding, and communicating analyses of the relative costs and benefits of this decision was neglected.

In addition, the decision as to whether the institution should introduce a new brand, or maintain its existing brand also involved choosing between independent department and school brands or enveloping these smaller brands with a university brand. Balancing these two options is also part of the brand strategy, which should guide the organisation's choices. The final choice ultimately requires internal branding to provide guidance on aligning the choice with the values of the organisation and the employees and how they might be able to build new, mutual values to promote meaningfulness. Internal branding may support mutuality in re-branding endeavours and, in so doing, diminish obstacles in employees' minds and promote the meaningfulness of the re-branding.

## **Reconciliations in Building Mutuality II**

### *Dilemma 2: Voice at the Organisational Level vs. Voice at the Departmental Level*

To achieve meaningful organisational change, it is crucial to not lose the “voice” of individual departments/units in the process of unifying the higher education brand. In the case organisation, balancing between the two options of more small independent departmental marketing/communication and larger more centralized marketing/communication approach led to doubts about the meaningfulness of the re-branding. Existing research suggests that, to successfully integrate multiple brands into a single brand, one must skilfully consider all parties involved (e.g. Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana, 2007; Aspara *et al* 2014). Most or all parties involved in the integration should be heard and combined into one “voice” without

losing their values. Thus, to reconcile Dilemma 2, new and mutual values should be communicated by the institutions marketing communications (MarCom) department.

Importantly, one key issue in building mutuality is people's willingness to engage in the process. If mutuality efforts are mandated or imposed, they may hinder meaningful outcomes and the building of mutuality (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; George and Park, 2017; Yeoman and O'Hara, 2017). Here, and often in connection to organisational changes (see also Kuoppakangas, 2014), up-coming changes are avoidable and seen as up-down orders instead of moves in which individuals can freely and willingly engage (Yeoman and O'Hara, 2017). However, most changes are essential for an organisation's survival. Therefore, explicit reasonings and rationales for the changes and efforts that include all stakeholders' voices and concerns might have reconciling outcomes. Finding a mutual voice for all different departments and units is time-consuming, as is securing the unique needs of departments and units that require specially tailored marketing/communication to address their target audience and consumers. Further, on-campus and online programmes have different target groups and, thus, different marketing/communication needs (see also Robinson, 2017).

Our results indicate that most of the departments/units both not only lost their marketing/communication autonomy and but also felt at risk of lower student enrolment and employee recruitment. A minority of informants felt that little had changed in their departments/units, and that they still had the autonomy and that they had incorporated the new branding guidelines into their marketing/communication. Most importantly, and as explained above, according to the empirical analysis, an effective Dilemma 2 reconciliation involves proactive educative communication between the departments and the new centred MarCom. In building such mutuality, internal branding is an essential mediator.

### **Reconciliations in Building Mutuality III**

### *Dilemma 3: Voluntary Down-Up Voicing vs. Up-Down Voicing*

The key factor in reconciling Dilemma 3 is meaningfulness, or the “voice” being genuinely heard (Yeoman and O’Hara, 2017) and taken into consideration in re-branding. Existing research shows the positive impact of employee engagement in organisational changes (e.g. Hytti *et al* 2015). In the present study, the empirical data analysis showed that those who had engaged in the re-branding events seemed more supportive of the organisational changes. However, there were a few exceptions: those who were not heard and, thus, reduced their engagement and felt that the re-branding was meaningless. In addition, some informants found the pre-branding events disappointing due to what seemed as an unprofessional method of gathering the employees’ opinions. This matter is critical in building mutuality; if “voices” are lost, the research method is invalid, and the outcomes are not meaningful (Lips-Wiersma and Wright, 2012; George and Park, 2017; Yeoman and O’Hara, 2017).

The opposite of voluntary engagement is involuntary engagement. In the case organisation, many of the informants felt that the re-branding endeavour had been imposed from the up down. In other words, the informants’ “voicing” felt meaningless and not genuinely heard because of the imposed settings of the re-branding. According to Yeoman and O’Hara (2017), mutuality is hindered when employee engagement is imposed and their voices are not heard. Similarly, the empirical data analysis showed that, at the external campuses, employees felt their voices were not heard or were lost in the long-distance communication. Here, the importance of shared values and having one’s “voice” heard can enhance mutuality and reconcile Dilemma 3. Internal branding may support such voices by securing communication between the external campuses and the new MarCom. Internal branding also supports targeted and proactive reciprocal internal communication, which may help reconcile re-branding dilemmas, foster mutuality and unlock meaningfulness in connection to the re-branding. The conclusions are presented in the next section.



## Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore core dilemmas related to re-branding a university. Although there is literature on internal branding in the university context (Judson *et al* 2006; Judson *et al* 2009; Sujchaphong *et al* 2014; Chapleo and Clark, 2016; Dean *et al* 2016 ), the current study offers novel insight by applying a dilemma approach to detect potential core dilemmas and a lack of meaningfulness, which might hinder effective re-branding. In so doing, this study answers the call of Suomi *et al* (2014), who argue that more research using the dilemma approach should be conducted in the context of reputation and brand management in higher education.

Further, this study has detected, named and defined core dilemma pairs and their reconciliations related to building meaningfulness and mutuality among employees to enhance successful re-branding. Challenges in building mutuality and shared values involve three core dilemma pairs: 1) new brand vs. previous brand; 2) voice at the organisational level vs. voice at the departmental level; and 3) voluntary down-up voicing vs. up-down voicing.

The findings suggest that employee engagement in re-branding does not necessarily build employee supportiveness unless the core dilemmas are reconciled to produce meaningful re-branding results and mutuality, with shared values among employees. Thus, the study suggests that implementing a new brand involves more than internal communication; it also requires that internal branding addresses ambiguities and emerging dilemmas by building mutuality and unlocking meaningfulness in the re-branding.

This work contributes to the literature on re-branding and internal branding, particularly in the higher education context, by mapping the core dilemma pairs and introducing their possible reconciliations. The study presents a novel interlocked conceptual framework of re-branding, internal branding and dilemma approach, which takes into account employee engagement and

meaningfulness. Employee engagement is a key element in internal branding. It seems that the experience of meaningfulness is more likely to occur when employee become actively connected to a worthy object, or something or someone of value, such that they are ‘gripped, excited, involved by it’ (see Wolf, 2010). Hence, by incorporating the aspects of meaningfulness and mutuality building into existing scholarly discussions, this study provides novel insight into the existing discussion on internal branding.

With regard to practical managerial implications, we argue the preparedness to detect and address dilemmas is central to successful re-branding. When managing re-branding in higher education organisations, traditional change management approaches often produce unreconciled dilemmas that hinder the implementation of the new brand. In the case organisation, the reconciliation of the detected core dilemma pairs connected to the re-branding endeavour involved employees’ engagement with the re-branding process from the beginning, with the aid and guidance of internal branding. Indeed, implementing a new brand in higher education involves embracing the world of dilemmas by including employees in reconciliation and therefore adding meaningfulness to the re-branding endeavour.

Overall, therefore, this study makes a significant contribution to the extant literature on both HE Institutional re-branding and internal branding through identifying core dilemma pairs and discussing their possible reconciliations. Whilst this work was drawn from the higher education sector, a degree of generalisability is inherent, and indeed the work may be replicated in other sectors in the future.

### **Limitations and future research**

This study was limited by data being collected from one organization. Also the informants were limited to a range of mid-level administrators and deans at the student union, regional campuses, different institutional departments and specific faculties and schools. The chosen

informants were regarded information-rich key persons for the purpose of this study. However, the results are generalisable to similar cases; hence, the study provides valuable insight for future studies in this field of interest. The collected empirical data is rich in terms of findings and therefore answers the research objectives and meets the purpose of this study, which was to explore the core dilemmas related to re-branding in the context of a university. Future studies could explore the extent to which the institutions re-brand affects other stakeholders. For example, research examining how the institutions re-brand affects the perceptions of the other employees than the informants of this study, and in addition, the perceptions of current and potential students would yield additional insightful results. Also, longitudinal studies examining the longer-term results of the organizations rebrand on the same stakeholder group may also offer complimentary insights to the conclusions from this research.

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## Tables 1-3

### Dilemma 1: New brand vs. Previous brand

#### Organisational and professional values:

(I-12): “[...] If you think of higher education as a commodity, which I don't, branding it makes sense. But because I don't think of higher education as a commodity, but as a very important process, very important to the future of our society... the idea that you can market it like soup... I think makes it... devalues it, makes it shallow?”

#### Lack of brand strategy:

(I-11): “That’s distressing to me because, once again, you take a wonderful process like branding and it’s meaningless because it’s not done in the proper order. New paint is wonderful, but if you need to replace the gypsum board under it, you gotta do that first. The paint will just hide it”.

#### Frequent re-branding and ineffective use of financial and human resources:

(I-12): “...I mean, it took... it took an enormous amount of resources. I'm sure money to hire that firm... time, from various people who were pulled off their jobs to serve on those different, you know, sort of focus group things. ...and really, what... what was it for? Like, how... where's the beef? Like, really, has... how has it... how has it... impacted enrolment? And could that money have been better spent?”

(I-14): “I don’t find it that different. I mean, we’ve gone through so many over the years, iterations of colours and fonts that... it’s new. I’m not sure it’s any better. I don’t see a great deal of difference in it [...] Others feel that only “big-bang” changes are effective and valuable: “If they’re gonna change, they better change big! Subtle changes aren’t probably worth it”.

(I-18): “[...] there was a lot of stuff already working, and it didn't necessarily need to be completely re-cast for hundreds of thousands of dollars, or more, whatever it was. So... yeah, so I think some convincing and compelling rationale would be helpful, and then the operationalisation of it is an important piece: What does this actually mean to our staff and our workers, and what we prepare”.

#### Independent school/faculty brand vs. one unifying brand:

(I-19): “I think that internal challenges would be how do we come up with a branding message that represents all aspects or all stakeholders on campus, and all the professionals on campus, because it is a free environment and people in university settings do have their very unique understanding of the university’s strengths and potential. So, coming up with a message that represents all, or at least represents most of the values that the university wants to present, it would be challenging”.

#### Meaningless change:

(I-8): “I think, to be perfectly honest, the obstacles were in people’s minds, not anywhere else”.

## **Dilemma 2: Voice at the Organisational Level vs. Voice at the Departmental Level**

### **Unified new brand enhances consistency:**

(I-16): “[...] certainly an advantage to having a uniform, consistent image for the university, and I say image not just, you know, visually, but also textual image—the font and the look, you know, the colours. I think there’s a real advantage to that. I see it with other universities that have adopted that uniform presence, and there is certainly, you know, I see some value in that”.

(I-18): “I’m not sure that it’s completely effective to... to brand everything with the same brand without leaving some opportunity for... a distinctive voice: the distinctive voice of specific areas of study on campus”.

### **Loss of autonomy:**

(I-1): “I think that it was developed through a shotgun wedding approach. It was a forced situation”.

(I-18): “Well, we had our own brand [...] design things. I mean, sure, they were vetted through X [case university] at a large, marketing department, but [...] we had some independent... independently derived [...] design items [...] There is none [independence]now”.

(I-2): “[...] we had everything taken away from us [...]” (I-2).

### **‘One size does not fit all’:**

(I-12): “[...] we do know that OL enrolments have started to go down [...] since the re-branding campaign and the new website [...] they have no particular concern about the virtual world [...] So, I think that... unless they really are careful to designate... people within the centralised marketing department to look after the needs of OL?”.

(I-10): “[t]here are entirely different marketing strategies between distance students and campus, face-to-face students, so that’s a very important thing to keep in mind in the future”.

### **Mutual voice:**

(I-2): “No one’s come to us to say: What do you need to do your job effectively here? Just that the whole model, in my judgement, I was very critical of, as saying that’s what I expect from a ‘service unit’ is to come to the faculty and say: What do you need? We’re here to deliver it. But what I am getting is: No, we’re doing it this way, and here’s when you will do it”.

(I-17): “I’ve made a definite effort on my own to make sure that they [MarCom] know what our theme is and what our values are and what we want to have promoted in the... in the marketplace”.

(I-18): “I appreciate the value of the centralised MarCom structure... but I think that... when that’s central... I think that that centrality needs to be deeply connected to the track record of... of... individual areas on campus that made... do some of their own marketing or have their own ideas or their own insights, I guess, into their marketing needs”.

### **Dilemma 3: Voluntary Down-Up Voicing vs. Up-Down Voicing**

#### **Importance of internal communication:**

(I-2): *"They're not communicating effectively. You know, there's not effective communication. All of a sudden, I'm learning, holy crap, there's a whole bunch of stuff on this website, but we've never been informed about it!"*

(I-16): *"I really don't recall an effort made, and I read my emails very systematically, so I assume that a lot of other faculty were not... they were similarly not being informed".*

#### **Voices heard:**

(I-17): *"From my point, it was a very positive thing because some of the things that I said showed up in various elements of the ultimate branding that was adopted".*

(I-18): *"I think that participation certainly influenced my support for the branding initiative. Knowing the information and the intimate details and being able to see the path that the process was taking were very valuable for being able to support it at the different stages".*

#### **Voices not heard:**

(I-12): *"I actually don't feel like I was asked whether I wanted to support the branding campaign. It was like the branding campaign was happening, [and] we could provide input into what the brand could look like, but we didn't... there wasn't any question about 'Should we brand or not brand?' or... 'Is this a good thing to do?' or 'What are the larger issues?' So, it was just presented as a... de facto... situation, and my support was neither asked nor given".*

(I-4): *"Well, maybe they could actually make an effort to come and visit the regional communities and, you know, have community input [...] It's like nobody gives a shit, really. Excuse my language".*

#### **Voices lost:**

(I-18): *"I lost interest... because it wasn't really engaging me to think any differently about anything than what I had already been thinking. I didn't really feel there was a collective wave of, 'Wow!' or, 'Aah! That's... that's a great angle!' or, 'We didn't realise this!' or... or... you know, anything like that. I didn't really feel there was an 'Aha!' moment personally and... and, ah, collectively, I didn't really get the vibe that way either".*

(I-10): *"I really couldn't see a clear methodology to how information was being gathered [...] So that did affect my perception in a negative way as to the certain validity or transferability [...]".*

(I-2): *"Where we had no idea what was going to happen during that exercise; it was just a visit, and all of a sudden there was data collection happening, and I allowed it to proceed, and after it, I said, 'Holy crap'. I questioned the validity of that exercise and whether it was actually fruitful, given that people weren't really prepared to really understand what that session was going to be about".*

#### **Voluntary vs involuntary engagement:**

(I-2): *"[...] all of a sudden, the whole branding exercise was imposed on us [...]".*

(I-18): *"I think it probably appealed to a certain... staff and students and gave them an opportunity to kind of participate in something together [...] so I think it was probably a good vibe and liked it".*